

From the new Mission Support Group structure to strategic partnering to an aging civilian workforce and A-76 programs, there are significant changes happening now and on the horizon for Air Force civil engineering. In this interview with *Air Force Civil Engineer* magazine, Ms. Kathleen I. Ferguson, Deputy Air Force Civil Engineer, discusses the issues she's working on behalf of civil engineers worldwide and her philosophy on how to succeed in these ...

Changing Times

AFCE: Before taking your current position as The Deputy Air Force Civil Engineer, you worked as Chief, Combat Support Division for the Directorate of Supply, Deputy Chief of Staff for Installations and Logistics. You also served as chief of the Installations Support Panel twice, from 1995-1997 and 1999-2001. Has serving in other capacities within IL, outside the typical civil engineer spectrum, brought new perspective to your current work?

Ms. Ferguson: It was a great opportunity for me to work in the Directorate of Supply, and it was very different from anything I had ever done. I had spent the rest of my career in various civil engineering capacities. During my time in Air Force Supply I managed the appropriations 3080, other procurement and 3011, procurement of ammunition accounts for the Air Force. We managed the funding from cradle to grave — the planning, the programming, the budgeting and throughout execution of the dollars. Interestingly, I worked a lot of CE issues during that time. For instance, we bought all the vehicles for civil engineering, including construction equipment and RED HORSE vehicles. We bought all the war reserve materiel for the Air Force, as well as expeditionary airfield lighting systems, mobile aircraft arresting systems, and all the Harvest Bare equipment for deployed locations.

AFCE: What are some of the issues you plan to work in the coming year?

Ms. Ferguson: My primary responsibility is to assist The Air Force Civil Engineer, Maj Gen Robbins, in execution of the mission of Air Force Civil Engineering. Therefore, I am involved in a myriad of issues facing CE today — from supporting the wartime mission to being good stewards of the environment to executing our military construction and housing programs. Because of the wide variety of issues we work on a day-to-day basis I will focus on just a few. As you would expect, we are very involved in supporting the Global War on Terrorism, Operation NOBLE EAGLE, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and now Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Some of the key challenges we are facing are engineering deployment issues, relieving our stressed career fields, and demobilizing the Air Reserve Component.

The Air Force has 104,000 family housing units, and 40,000 of those do not meet modern standards and require either major renovation or replacement. One of the tools in our toolbox is the use of authorities allowing us to privatize where it is economically feasible. The Air Force currently has 38 projects programmed that will result in 40,000 privatized units. We have five projects awarded today, and are working very hard to award another eight projects in the next 12 months.



Ms. Kathleen I. Ferguson

We are continuing our efforts to provide improved automation tools to our personnel. I chair the Automation Steering Group. Its mission is to improve business processes through transitioning our current automation tools into a single logical database supporting the full range of operational and contingency responsibilities. ACES, the Automated Civil Engineer System, will provide the automated tools our installations and major commands need to do their job. It has a multitude of functionalities — operations, environmental, real property, housing and project management — those things our personnel need to do their jobs

more effectively and efficiently. Additionally, we need to be forward thinking. We're looking at how we're executing near-term and developing a strategic plan for where we want to be five years and 10 years down the road.

I also participate in the Engineering Senior Executive Panel. The ESEP is the SES-level group that provides overall direction to the Unified Facilities Criteria program and addresses any other engineering matters of common interest to DoD and the services.

AFCE: What other programs are absorbing your time?

Ms. Ferguson: I spend a good deal of my time on personnel issues as Chair of the Civil Engineer Career Program Policy Council. The policy council, which includes representatives from all major commands as well as all career fields in the Civil Engineer Career Program, is working many issues today on behalf of our civilians. For instance, executive assessment process, education and training opportunities, accession planning, Palace Acquire interns and force renewal of our workforce.

I also participate on a senior executive panel with my counterparts in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps in the development and assimilation of engineers into the Facilities Engineer Career Field under DAWIA (Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act) (Nov 90). Both military and civilian positions that are considered acquisition are eligible for assimilation. The actual number of covered positions will not be known until all the positions are coded by the major commands. There are five sub-areas within FE that include planning, engineering & construction, base operations & support (facility management), real estate and environmental. We currently have an Integrated Process Team with participants from all major commands participating in developing the assimilation plan for Air Force personnel into this new career field under DAWIA.

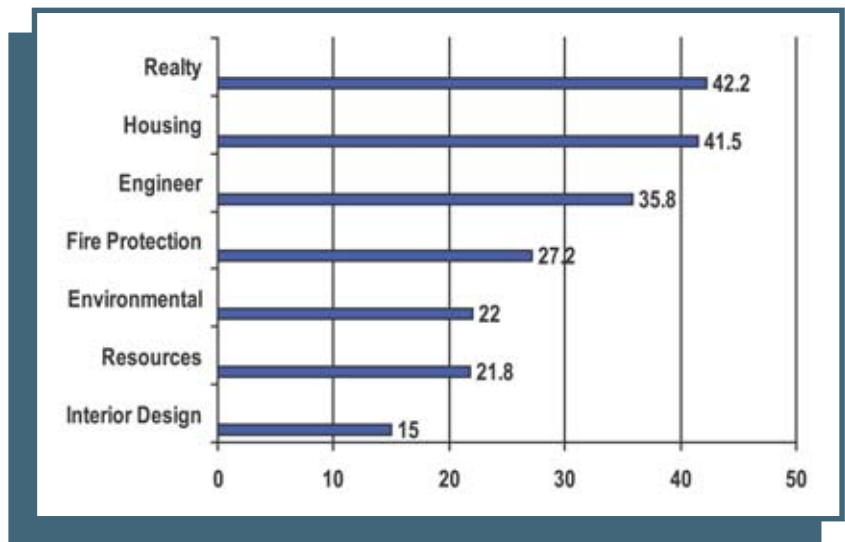
AFCE: There have been news reports that the Air Force's civilian work force is "out of balance," with fewer young employees than needed to replace those coming eligible for retirement. Do you think the career field is on the right track to satisfy current and future Air Force mission needs?

Ms. Ferguson: One of the biggest challenges we face is the aging work force and the number of people who are eligible to retire over the next five years. In housing, for instance, 41.5 percent of our folks are eligible to retire in the next five years. That's pretty typical of most of our career fields covered by the CECF.

One of the goals of the CECF Policy Council is to make sure we have people coming up through the ranks, trained, with the right experience and in the right grade structure, so that we have people to backfill all the GS-12, -13, -14 and -15 positions that will become vacant over the next few years. We are working this issue very hard through mentoring, training and accession planning.

The Policy Council is also evaluating the health of each of the individual career fields. We're starting with the housing career field because it's pretty small, with only 202 people, and also because there have been many changes in the housing business over the last few years. We've outsourced a lot of the housing management offices, and we're privatizing nearly 40,000 family housing units at 38 installations. The Policy Council has charged Katie Halvorson, chief, AF Housing Operations Branch, and Brenda Robinson, HQ Air Combat Command Programs Division, to evaluate the housing career field to ensure the promotion paths and create a prototype program to fix any problems with the career field. Once that's done, we'll extrapolate it to other career fields.

Percentage of employees in CECF eligible to retire in less than five years



Another issue that we need to look at is accession planning, which ties into how we're going to fill those positions. That's moving folks from one place to another and making sure they have the right training, the right skills and the right things in their personal portfolios to make them competitive. In a broad sense, the Policy Council will be looking at some tools to help with that.

AFCE: What are some of the things that we can do in the field to help with recruitment and retention of civilians?

Ms. Ferguson: Some individual organizations are

doing a good job of recruiting and then growing their junior personnel, and we can take lessons learned from them to apply across the Air Force. At the November 2002 Policy Council meeting we brought in three deputy base civil engineers to share their experiences. At Grand Forks AFB, the deputy BCE, Mary Giltner, uses many tools at this hard-to-fill location. She uses recruitment and retention bonuses, recruits heavily at local universities and utilizes student hires and Palace Acquire interns.

Glenn Meyer at Ellsworth AFB, SD, had many suggestions that the CECF Policy Council is evaluating as ways to improve recruiting/retention. For example, how do we entice interns to move to a northern tier location, what other avenues of training do we have available for the AFIT technical courses that have been eliminated over the years, and how do we attract candidates to fill critical positions vacated when personnel accept assignments in overseas locations?

Finally, Mike Clark at Eglin AFB, FL, had some different challenges than the northern tier bases are facing. One is how to reduce the amount of time it takes for positions to clear through the staffing process, a problem at many locations, and then clear the large stopper lists at Eglin — a very different scenario from some of our other locations but a very real problem for Eglin.

In summary, each of our installations has challenges, but our civil engineers have found innovative ways to recruit and hire talented employees. Many of us signed on under the Civil Service Retirement System. Under today's Federal Employee Retirement System people are very portable, and they tend to move between jobs a lot more. They're not going to hire on with IBM or AT&T — or the government — and plan to stay for 30 years. We need to find ways to convince people to come work for the federal government and then provide them with exciting jobs so they will stay for many years.

AFCE: What kinds of training opportunities are available to civilian employees?

Ms. Ferguson: There are many opportunities available for both long-term and short-term training. We have several folks that were selected through the Civilian Career Development Program and are attending long-term, full-time training now. In the current academic year, we have three people at Air Command and Staff College, two in senior service school, a two-year Legislative Fellow on Capitol Hill, and two people serving overseas in career broadening positions. I would encourage everyone to talk to their supervisor or mentor to evaluate whether a CCDP opportunity is right for them. We also offer many short-term training opportunities through the Civil Engineer Career Program. Personnel should watch the CECF web site for information and opportunities.

AFCE: How do you feel about mentoring?

Ms. Ferguson: Mentoring is essential for everyone, no matter what their grade or whether they are civilian or military, to help them achieve his or her full potential. Whether formal or informal, it is crucial to the development of our personnel. Everyone needs a mentor — someone they can go to for advice, feedback and career guidance. Mentoring is everyone's responsibility. I've challenged all of the Policy Council members to become active mentors — both inside and outside their organization. Take the time to sit down with people and evaluate their career briefs and their education, and look to see what they need to get that next job, and the job after that, based on where they want to go in their careers.

AFCE: Change is always difficult. What kind of advice do you have for the civilian engineers, in terms of how to ride out this perpetual white water that we're in, to encourage them to develop the right mindset and get through it?

Ms. Ferguson: I recently spoke to the Professional Housing Managers Association. The keynote speaker spoke about the old adage, "May you live in interesting times." He had a healthy perspective on that. He said you can think of it as either a Chinese curse or an Irish blessing. It's all in how you interpret it.

My advice to the civilian engineers in these changing times is to be flexible. I think their best chance to move forward, whether it's to a lateral job or a promotion, is to get broad experience. Our people should not be afraid to try new things, to go from programming to environmental to construction, for instance, and to work in different places. If you start out at base level, do a tour at a major command or at the Air Force Center for Environmental Excellence or the Air Force Civil Engineer Support Agency to help round out your background.

In the next five years, the number of opportunities for our people is going to be almost overwhelming. We almost have more opportunities than we have people at this stage. So, the future is bright for those who are flexible, who are willing to work hard, who understand the AF and CE business and are willing to move and take on new challenges.

There will be tremendous opportunities in the coming years for our people to help mold the future of Air Force Civil Engineering, to help define policy and determine our own future. If your base is going through one of these dynamic changes, view it as an Irish blessing and get involved in helping to frame what the final outcome will be, rather than sitting on the sidelines. We've got to be involved to help draft the roadmap for the future. Our younger folks are so smart, technologically, and they're very willing to think outside the box. There are tremendous opportunities for folks who want to be a part of the action. I encourage everyone to seize them.